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ABSTRACT

Too much accountability, declining enrollment, and conservative decision making are hindering public education. Education should be deregulated, more generously funded, and should make use of parent and community resources. Decision making, in order to meet individual school district needs, should take place at the local, rather than at the state or federal, level. Support is needed for bilingual, multicultural education, improved research, and the elimination of tracking. Assessment in general, and standardized testing in particular, need to be reevaluated. To provide effective education to the nation's children, institutions must once again respect children and young people, intensify resources for their development, and cooperate with their parents. (SAS)

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Reflections or Elementary and Secondary Education: A Prelude to the 1980's

Prepared for the

Subcommittee on Elementary, Secondary and Vocational Education

of the

Committee on Education and Labor

of the United State Congress

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An Introductory Statement

I am pleased with this opportunity to offer to the Committee on Education and Labor a personal perspective about elementary and secondary education in the forthcoming decade. My brief remarks - a mixture of beliefs and hopes as well as social policy analyses - grow out of twenty-five years of experience in public education as a classroom teacher, university professor and administrator, educational historian, social policy critic and parent. They are not meant to be all-inclusive - space was hardly available for anything so ambitious - or prescriptive. My intent is to offer a way of reflecting upon some of our educational needs as the new decade comes upon us.

Public confidence in the schools has declined steadily over the course of the current decade, now having reached its lowest level in the twentieth century.* The optimism of the 1960's - a time when educational reform and equality of educational opportunity were central features of public policy, epitomized in part by the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 - has given way to a variety of conservative responses which have tended to immobilize schools, teachers and students and encourage divisiveness in public education. Bilingual-bicultural education programs, for example, are under seige, commitments to integrated (racial, social, ethnic) schools appear no longer as central to public policy, tracking (whether the result of programs for the gifted, special education, vocational education or competency testing for purposes of promotion and graduation) has become acceptable again. Now one could argue that the current condition is related to the general economic slump that exists or that public education is merely in a down-

* The focus of this paper is education; however, it needs to be noted that public confidence in most other political, economic and social institutions is also low. Government is viewed as ineffective and unresponsive, if not corrupt. Mainline churches are struggling with only limited success to respond to social change. Our economic system is faltering, our standing in the world diminishing, a sense of malaise has come to dominate much of our thought as expressed in the media and popular literature.

cycle, a period of reassessment; that the more progressive tendencies which have been characteristic of 20th century public education - the decades of the 1920's and 1960's being prime examples - will emerge again in the years ahead. While I tend to believe this to be the case, I am also concerned greatly about a phenomenon that is relatively unique and may exacerbate our current dilemmas. I wish to discuss this now inasmuch as it will relate indirectly, if not directly, to almost everything else that follows.

Changing Demography of the Schools: Public Education and Its Clientele

The baby boom years are behind us and our school age population has entered a decline that will likely continue over the next decade. This demographic factor was predictable. But what was less predictable has been the very recent growth in private school attendance - principally from those white and middle class families that have traditionally provided the political and fiscal base for public education. Our public schools, especially in our urban communities, are becoming, as they were to a large degree at the end of the 19th century, schools for the poor and minorities.* These children have always provided for schools significant educational challenges - not because they lack intelligence but because the schools have been organized, by and large, to serve the interests and experiences of middle-class, mainstream children. While the schools have succeeded, in spite of their dominant character, with large numbers of children and young people from minority and poor families, their failures have been even larger. The parents of

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* At the end of the 19th century, the public schools served the poor. Minorities typically lacked any significant educational opportunity.

our changing public school population lack in most of our urban settings sufficient political power to influence public policy. At a time when the needs in the public schools may be greater than ever, the pressures against supporting public education are intensifying. Those who vote in local communities and state legislatures to restrict curriculum to "basic skills education," demand that students pass particular tests for grade promotion and graduation, permit class sizes to increase, limit materials expenditures, and the like, are to a very large degree imposing penalties on this changing public school population that are not imposed on those who can afford to go to the private schools. No private school student in Florida, for example, faced the spector of being labeled a "functional illiterate" because private school students didn't have to take the State's mandated Functional Literacy Test.*

Parents, Communities and Schools

What can Congress do about the foregoing. It needs to recognize the changing demography - in numbers and in socio-economic, racial and ethnic composition - and be prepared to offer the fiscal support that may be increasingly more difficult to acquire at the local levels. More productively in the long run, however, Congress might provide even greater emphasis to its mandates for significant parent involvement. At the moment Parent Advisory Councils (PAC's), associated with programs such as Title I, have had only limited success. Much more attention needs to be given to training programs and to the development of more effective, less ambiguous roles for PAC's. Such groups might, for example, with increased and more enlightened assistance from state education agencies,

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* The Functional Literacy Test has recently been retitled the "State School Assessment Test II."

be given far greater responsibility for the evaluation of Title I programs as a means of increasing their understanding of education and their political power in support of their children.

The PAC's discussed above have related almost exclusively to special programs within schools. They are important but we need in the future to consider also other kinds of councils that are broader in scope. For too long, we have viewed schools almost exclusively as the center of our educational efforts on behalf of the young. Without denying the importance of schools, we need to acknowledge that there are many other important educative settings in our communities that may be far more influential educationally for many individuals; namely, homes, television, libraries, museums, parks, recreation centers, neighborhoods, banks, stores, churches, and the work place. We often concern ourselves with the quality of the schools through official organizations such as boards of education or parent advisory councils but take less note of the quality of the out-of-school learning opportunities available to children and young people. These have deteriorated to a very large degree in many of our communities. Parks are not maintained, libraries and museums have restricted their hours, volunteer social service programs have declined from lack of attention, children are left alone more because parents are working and extended family units are less frequent, etc. The resources which exist in most of our communities - urban and rural - to attend to out-of-school learning - are large and to a very large degree untapped. To depend exclusively on teachers <u>in</u> schools for intentional learning is a limited view of education. How many individuals with outstanding preparation and experience in mathematics, engineering, medical sciences, business, or the technical and non-technical vocations

are available to children outside of school in any systematic activity? How many individuals who are practicing dancers, actors, painters, sculptors, musicians, writers, artisens, crafts persons can one find currently involved with public school children in or out of schools? What kinds of child care services exist in our communities? Questions of this sort are innumerable. Community education programs might be more broadly conceived to include school-community councils able to view education more broadly than schools, that seek to raise public concerns about the erosion of constructive out-of-school learning opportunities and engage all of the particular community's educational, institutional and human resources to a reconstruction that can benefit children and young people.

Individual Schools, Classrooms and State Education Agencies

Knowing what we do about the improvement of learning, individual schools and classrooms as units need to be the focus of attention. The further decision-making moves from the parents, principal and teachers in a particular school, the more remote becomes the potential for any significant improvement.* To act on this knowledge demands, in particular,

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* It should be noted in relation to the point being made that there has been, in a general sense, a tendency for teacher-administrator relationships to deteriorate to the detriment of children, young people and their parents. The separation of their professional organizations and the labor-management postures that have developed have contributed to a divergence of educational interests and agendas. This separation is not a constructive base upon which to build the healthiest of educational settings. Placing more education decision-making responsibility at the particular school level may be a significant means of altering the existing condition. It is here that teachers and administrators, along with parents, can coalesce their energies and interests inasmuch as the children are real and visible.

a different role for state departments of education and in turn a different direction for Congress. Much of what Congress, for example, has promoted over the past decade in its efforts to strengthen state departments of education has supported centralization. In general, state departments of education wield more power now than has ever been true. They develop regulations, influence, if not control, curriculum, examine, direct, accredit, etc. The challenge for state departments in the decade ahead is not more centralization but an increased capacity for providing curriculum, evaluation, staff development, parent training resources to local school units. The goal needs to be one of increasing the competence of individuals within local districts rather than centralizing competence at the state level. Rather than more dollars being directed at the development of evaluation and curriculum materials at the state level, for example, as is true in Michigan, Florida, South Carolina, and New York, among other states, more fiscal resources need to be directed toward the development of locally relevant evaluation and curriculum materials in local schools and communities. Federal efforts to strengthen state departments might take into account the foregoing needs and the changes that are demanded.

Pluralism, Curriculum and Testing

We need to reestablish support for pluralism - to acknowledge that we have in the United States individuals and communities with a variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds. This support needs to include continuing attention to bilingual-bicultural education and to a broad conception of curriculum. Curriculum development activities which support multi-culturalism are more critical now than ever. Curricular offerings that include the arts, literature, languages, a broad array

of sciences and community studies need to be viewed as essential. At a time when public confidence in schools is low, however, it seems relatively easy for decision makers to consider narrowing curricular offerings to fall into the simple paradigm of "basic skills" education.

One impetus for the narrowing of curriculum in our schools, beyond the simple appeal of "basic skills," is the outcome paradigm that has come to dominate our evaluation systems. We tend within this model to measure that which is believed most measurable. And much of what is most measurable is often least important. The popular construct for measuring, the standardized, norm-referenced tests, tends to limit what can be learned about individuals and schools as it influences the curriculum itself. For example, while the tests often purport to measure one's ability to read, it must be clear to most educators and parents who examine the tests that they can't represent reading as reading is commonly understood; they are at best weak indicators of reading. Persons who read very well may select "wrong" answers from among the limited choices available (the testing construct is dominated by a multiple choice format) for a host of reasons which may have little to do with their ability to read.* The tests foster a belief that reading is a set of discrete skills that can be - even should be - learned in isolation. Instructional programs which support such a belief - that are designed to improve scores on such tests - abound, principally, and unfortunately, in programs serving Title I children. And what is competency in writing? Is it knowing rules of grammar and spelling or is it the ability to make oneself clear in a written statement? To examine most of the tests that exist, the emphasis is on mechanics, the cosmetics of writing. There are a number of instructional programs designed to improve test scores in the area of

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* The literature is full of descriptions of the drawbacks that multiple-choice formats possess; namely, single correct responses, ambiguity, cultural and linguistic bias, etc.

writing. Few, however, demand that students engage in very much writing. To give as much attention to test score outcomes as now exists in schools may cause some decision-makers to believe that the schools are "doing something about achievement" but the situation is otherwise.

Title II of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, as amended in 1978, now includes "effective expression, both oral and written" as part of its definition of basics for which states may now write comprehensive plans. How "effective expression" gets assessed, however, will determine to a large extent how congressional intent gets translated into practice.

In relation to standardized tests, Congress might wish to review existing federal regulations governing evaluation. Many, in fact, encourage the indiscriminate if not outright misuse of tests. Title I evaluation protocols, as now being prepared, are a case in point. Students, their parents and teachers are not being served by evaluation systems that give considerable weight to "gain scores" on standardized tests. We need, in Title I, and all other areas of education, assessment procedures which are more sensitive to the learning of children and young people across a wide range of curricula and provide the kinds of information that can be used in the development of responsive instructional programs. What is termed in the educational literature as alternative or qualitative evaluation/assessment procedures need greater support. This could come through existing agencies such as NIE (for purposes of development and dissemination) and through changes in the regulations prepared by the Department of Education which tend now to discourage alternative assessment activities.

We need also to continue educational efforts designed to bring greater understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of various approaches to assessment, testing included, as well as their appropriate and inappropriate uses. Many individuals and organizations have in the past few years begun to press for "truth-in-testing" legislation as a means of supporting greater fairness in testing as well as bringing about greater public discussion of and knowledge about tests and testing. While these efforts appear related principally to post secondary testing, the impact is likely to be carried over to testing at the elementary and secondary levels as well. Congressional support of such efforts is a step toward needed reform.

Historical Perspective

Public education in the United States has a history almost as long as the republic itself, yet we lack extensive historical accounts of schools and their interaction with the culture at large. In large measure this is the case because those concerned with schools have not seen historical perspective as critical to the improvement of schools. If we had, for example, better descriptions of school curricula, organizational patterns and instructional processes, as well as the political, economic and social factors which influenced them, we might have a better grasp of what educational reform demands. Lacking historical perspective, we enter often into what are viewed as new directions for reform without a sufficient base or inclination for examining earlier, but similar, efforts and their contexts.*

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* Competency testing is a particularly good case in point. The history of certifying examinations in the United States goes back to at least 1845 and the overall results in the period to 1910 were not positive. The results of much of what we are seeing now in the new wave of competency testing are all painfully similar to results in those earlier years.

The foregoing suggests an area of investigation that needs encouragement as part of the nation's research agenda. Unfortunately, historical, descriptive research has not been viewed worthy of support.

Research and Evaluation: Concerns about Methodology

Since I have introduced the topic of research as well as evaluation, areas in which the federal role has been large, much more needs to be said. Educational research has been with us for a long time, focusing on questions of teaching and learning as well as on aspects of curriculum. The world view that has given form to most educational research and evaluation efforts - and often given status as the "dominant method" or "scientific method" - is conceptualized in terms of a treatment-outcome or input-output model; social and historical contexts, aspects of programs as well as individual's lives, are treated as "variables" or "factors" to be interpreted through a range of statistical manipulations; reliability rather than validity is stressed; control, concern about decreasing variability in teacher-child responses, program implementation and instructional materials assumes paramount importance. The national evaluation of programs such as Follow Through and Head Start should have provided Congress with sufficient evidence to know that this basic model just doesn't provide the kind of information that is helpful in policy formation or theoretical understandings of schools and schooling.

How such a methodology came to dominate educational research and evaluation in the United States is a matter of educational history;

that it continues to play center stage can be explained to some degree by an unrequited love-affair with science and technology, a belief that we only need to apply a little more sophistication to the model to see significant results, breakthroughs in learning about schools and schooling, teaching and learning.

While few would deny that many of the research and evaluation activities carried out within this "scientific" tradition are interesting, some even useful, too few have added significantly to our cumulative wisdom or given direction to teachers in classrooms inasmuch as they infrequently get close enough to the important data. The methodology - the philosophic outlook which gives direction to contemporary practice of this "scientific" tradition - limits the kinds of questions that are open to investigation, especially in relation to settings as complex as classrooms. This doesn't mean that the direction has nothing to offer; only that the potential is limited.

Alternatives to this dominant, quantitative mode of educational research and evaluation are necessary if the quality of our educational enterprise is to improve. The alternative directions are rooted in observation, descriptive analysis and phenomenological inquiry - processes designed to get close to data in order to establish meaning. This construct typically acknowledges the improbability as well as the undesirability of controlling variables within social settings, operates on the assumption that educational growth and development are manifest in diverse and unique ways as well as in shared ways, gives higher priority to validity than reliability and is cautious about component analysis.

Now I certainly do not wish to argue that what I have labeled here as the alternative has not been a part of the repertoire of educational researchers and evaluators over the years. Research has obviously encompassed a range of methodologies for different problems or questions. What I am expressing, however, is that this direction has been given a lower and less credible status within the broad research community and in the directives of the federal government, the largest contributor to educational research, to the detriment of our search for new knowledge and cumulative wisdom. Our 1980's agendas for research need to be more broadly conceived, less devoted to a research direction that has not demonstrated a capacity for coming to terms with the complexities of classrooms, or the important issues relating to children, young people and learning.

The Teacher as Researcher

How does one get close to classrooms, to learn more about the variety of ways that children come to reading, how children respond to or extend the use of diverse materials, how children use particular language, what processes children go through in problem solving, the degree of continuity that occurs in children's patterns of learning, why teachers do what they do, when and how? The questions are almost inexhaustible. A productive route for responding constructively to such questions - that makesuse principally of the alternative processes highlighted above - is through and with classroom teachers. This may not be a simple task given the history of research in education and the impact of a related technological orientation in curriculum development,

but it is clearly possible. What is necessary is to help reestablish in schools a capacity for reflection. John Dewey, among others thought of teaching as a professional knowledge producing endeavor. We need now to assume a similar view as we approach the decade of the eighties. Dewey's concern was that teachers needed to maintain a reflective capacity in order to grow, to become individuals who were clear about their intentions and capable of making independent judgments about their classrooms. Teachers with such qualities are capable of informing the research community and assuming a collaborative role. They might also engage in independent research.

Let us assume that encouragement of teachers as researchers - with or without external assistance - produces a deluge of unique descriptions of practice. While some researchers might pale at the prospect, wondering what form generalizations might take, we should, as a matter of public policy, be delighted. The accrual of such accounts would give us some good direction for inquiry, and it would ensure growth in our understandings of classroom practice. Furthermore, teacher's capacity for explicating and understanding practice would increase, thus building more potential for confidence in the schools, a constructive response to the current concern for accountability.

The Teacher as Learner and Teacher Education

More needs to be said about teachers. They are under intense external pressures now, pushed increasingly in the 70's into technician roles rather than the students of teaching roles discussed above. We need in the 1980's to give much more attention to the personal and professional growth of teachers. There is little reason for teachers to become, as so many do, less effective, less interested in children and young people, less enthusiastic as the years pass. Whereas federal and state programs gave considerable support to teachers in the 1960's,

this support has not been sustained in the 1970's. What little remains is fragmented and ambiguous in purpose. One new recent initiative that has potential, if enlarged, if given a broader vision than is now provided by the existing Office of Education leadership, is the Teacher Center Program. Teachers Centers have the potential for consolidating many of the scattered training programs that exist in the vocational, special, bilingual, parent education areas to the ultimate benefit of children and young people. Teacher Centers can also serve to stimulate school based staff development programs which draw heavily upon teachers themselves. Teacher Center funding, however, needs expansion in the 1980's if the promise of this innovation is to be realized.

Teacher Education programs are underfunded throughout the United States. Given the importance of teachers and educational institutions within communities, teacher education expenditures need to enlarge, not because we need more teachers but because we need teachers even better prepared.* Teacher education programs at the pre-service level demand far more intensity than our mass programs have been able to provide. Public Law 94-142, for example, which was long overdue, places new and difficult responsibilities on schools and teachers and demands a more diverse preparation than has been typical at both the pre and in-service levels. In addition, teacher education institutions need to turn increasingly to the task of supporting the development of teachers in their in-service years. To carry out this responsibility is especially costly in time and human resources. While much of the responsibility for funding -

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* It should be noted that current talk of teacher surpluses - which will shrink through the 1980's - tends to mask the continuing need for teachers in particular areas of special education, early childhood education, enrivonmental education and the sciences and for teachers from minority backgrounds - black, chicano and American Indian.

in particular in the public institutions where most teachers are prepared and supported - rests within the states, added federal encouragement of experimentation and coordination of teacher education within states and regions would be timely in the 1980's.

Vocational Education

I am compelled, as a result of current research, to make several observations about vocational education programs. Vocational education became popular at the turn of the century as a vehicle for preparing young people for the growing industrial workforce. These programs attracted, for the most part, children of the poor and lower middle classes. The same condition exists today. Vocational educational programs represent in too many schools a tracking mechanism that begins early, generally in the 8th and 9th grades and tends to limit the options that ultimately are available for those who complete such programs. General mathematics, for example, in the 9th grade, the course taken by those who have been counseled out of algebra, is inhabited to a very large degree by girls, minority students and the poor. Similar conditions prevail in other vocationally oriented courses. Young seventeen and eighteen year olds who have gone through such programs find themselves with insufficient academic background to pursue post secondary work in colleges and universities and they are often closed out of many highly technical vocational areas because their science-math backgrounds are inadequate. We need to encourage schools to make fresh efforts to tutor those who need help in reading, writing, math and science in order that their options not be so limited. To argue that "these young people" are just too difficult to teach and it is, therefore, easier to talk them out of academic courses is no longer acceptable.

Vocational education has for a long time had considerable support on the belief that a good match exists between secondary programs and the work place. This relationship, however, has always been weak and is likely to remain so given the rapidity of change in many of the vocational fields and the fluctuation of the economy itself. Given the large scale unemployment which exists among our post high school young people, ages 18-25, the largest percentage of unemployment since the Great Depression, there is a resurgence of belief that more vocational programming will help. We need more realism. The large scale unemployment has more to do with the sheer demography of the numbers of individuals who have entered the labor market in the past decade than to what is happening or not happening in schools. This imbalance between entry level jobs and the numbers of individuals entering the job market will decline in the 80's without any changes in the schools.

A phenomenon that has received little attention, unlike the unemployment problem, is the large scale employment of 14-17 year olds in the burgeoning service, fast food industries which pay minimum wages and provide no benefits. In many places 50-70 percent of the students are working on an average of 20-25 hours per week. Given our present organization of schools, these young people's school based educational experience is declining in intensity. There is little, if any, relationship between what these young people do in and out of school. The relationship could be larger and it need not be carried out within a vocational education format.

Technology and Education

I have not commented on the technological advances in our society that have potential for influencing constructively the learning of young people. The most maligned of our new technologies is the medium of

television. While many deplore, correctly I believe, much of what is offered, there is too little praise for the excellent programming that does exist. The educational potential is large and still untapped. Possibly in the 1980's we can commit more energy and imagination into making television more productive for children, young people and their families. Sesame Street, for example, is not the most promising direction. Not because it is lively and creates difficulty for teachers who, as the popular literature suggests, "are expected to perform like the characters on the program," but because it presents an inadequate model of education - segmented, unrelated and ahistorical. It has entertainment value but we ought not suggest that its educational value - in terms of school learning - is particularly noteworthy.* Beyond broadcast activity, the in-school use of television as a learning tool is virtually untapped.

The continued development of view data control systems - likely to be widely available in the 1980's - opens up fresh potential for bringing a wide range of educational programs into the home via the T.V. monitor. Cooperation of those developing such systems and the schools would be useful but we have little history of such cooperation. This may be a useful agenda for the decade ahead. In addition, home computor technology has advanced to a fairly high state in recent years and may in the next decade alter many of the ways children and young people learn. Such technological developments should be encouraged.

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* Changes in the Public Broadcasting Corporation which are scheduled for the 1980's may provide some fresh opportunities.

A Closing Statement

I have introduced in this paper a number of issues which I believe Congress should take into account as it considers educational policy for the 1980's. More could obviously have been introduced; for example, special education and the needs of the handicapped, better utilization of schools, theoretical issues relating to learning, among others. Education - in and out of the schools - needs to be given a high priority and needs to be more free of the polarization (and oversimplification) that has dominated much of the 1970's. We need to respect children and young people again, intensify our resources on behalf of their development and support their parents who wish for them the very best that our nation can provide.